

Kant's derivation of the moral 'ought' from a metaphysical 'is'

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Abstract: In this chapter, I argue that Kant can be read as holding that "ought" judgments follow from certain "is" judgments by mere analysis. More specifically, I defend an interpretation according to which (1) Kant holds that "S ought to F" is analytically equivalent to "If, as it can and would were there no other influences on the will, S's faculty of reason determined S's willing, S would F" and (2) Kant's notions of reason, the will, and freedom are all fundamentally non-normative. Not only does this reading have significant textual support, but, I claim, it also sheds light on why Kant takes freedom and morality to mutually imply one another. Moreover, while Kant does take there to be a gap between moral judgments and empirical descriptive statements, that gap is consistent with the analysis in question. I conclude by arguing that this rejection of the is-ought gap is not as philosophically implausible as it might seem, with a focus on G.E. Moore and Hume's arguments for certain 'gaps' between the normative and the non-normative.

Perhaps the most widely accepted claim in contemporary metaethics is that there is some sort of important 'gap' between facts or judgments about what merely *is* and facts or judgments about what morally *ought to be* (or facts or judgments about moral goodness, moral reasons, etc.). Most of Kant's readers have taken him to have recognized the gap and to have incorporated it into his metaethical views. My aim in this paper is to argue that there is a defensible reading of Kant according to which Kant rejected the gap in the strongest possible terms: taking "ought" judgments to follow *analytically* from certain purely "is" judgments (and vice-versa). On this reading, a true "ought" judgment simply describes a metaphysical fact, namely, the presence of certain

competing motivational forces in a subject. Kant would therefore accept a form of analytic reductionism about at least some moral facts. Though this interpretation is unorthodox, I attempt to show here that it is neither exegetically absurd nor philosophically uncharitable.

My interpretive proposal has two parts. While each part is consistent with extant readings of Kant,¹ the only commentator I know of has explicitly suggested anything like their conjunction is G.E. Moore (discussed below). The two parts are as follows:

Analytic Equivalence: Kant holds that “S ought to F” is analytically equivalent to “If, as it can and would were there no other influences on the will, S’s faculty of reason determined S’s willing, S would F.”

Non-Normative Freedom: Kant’s notions of reason, the will, and (thereby) freedom are all non-normative.

The notion of normativity I have in mind is very broad, including all practical prescriptions, evaluations, recommendations, etc. (more on this below). Moreover, in saying that a notion is non-normative, I allow that it can be used in defining normative notions. An analogy: the notion of a person is a non-corporate concept, even though the definition of “corporation” involves the notion of a person.

¹ Henry Allison, who puts the reciprocity of freedom and morality at the center of his interpretation of Kant's metaethics, seems to accept Analytic Equivalence (Allison 1990, 203), though that is not entirely clear. Dieter Schönecker has made some proposals that are similar in spirit to mine, but denies that it makes sense, strictly speaking, to talk of analyzing the imperatival ‘ought’ (Schönecker 2013, 232). Karl Schafer defends a related view in forthcoming work (Schafer Manuscript). Some of Christine Korsgaard's descriptions also suggest that she accepts something along the lines of Non-Normative Freedom (Korsgaard 2008, 3, but cf. Korsgaard 2009, xi). Clinton Tolley has argued that moral laws would not be normative for beings with holy wills, which suggests something like Non-Normative Freedom, though Tolley’s notion of normativity is narrower than mine (Tolley 2006).

My argument proceeds as follows. In §1, I offer direct textual grounds for Analytic Equivalence, and, in §2, I offer some indirect evidence for that claim. In §3, I defend Non-Normative Freedom, discussing Kant's notions of reason, the will, and freedom in turn. In §4, I describe the interpretive pay-off of accepting the conjunction of interpretive claims. In §5, I address three potential objections concerning Kant's other philosophical commitments. Finally, in §6, I address the most important philosophical objection: that any interpretation according to which Kant denied any is-ought gap is unacceptably uncharitable. While not attempting to give a decisive answer to this objection, I argue that, on my interpretation, Kant would be able to go a long ways towards accommodating the main intuitions behind the two best-known statements of the gap: those of Hume and Moore.

Four caveats. (1) While I aim to show that Analytic Equivalence Non-Normative Freedom are defensible, I do not try to rule out other readings of the relevant passages, or to show that my overall interpretation is better than extant interpretations. A proper comparison of interpretations would take more than a single paper.

(2) My textual arguments draw from a variety of Kant's writings, relying most heavily on the *Critique of Pure Reason* (hereafter: *KrV*), the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (hereafter: *GMS*), the *Critique of Practical Reason* (hereafter: *KprV*), and the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (hereafter: *KU*). It is unlikely that Kant's views remained perfectly fixed through the decade during which these works were produced. I assume, however, that Kant's core views remained relatively stable.

(3) My discussion bypasses most of the essential details of Kant's moral theory. I do not attempt to spell out how Kant's universalization test works, how to reconcile the different formulations of the moral law, what the fact of reason involves, or how we should understand Kant's theory of freedom. The claims I make here concern very general themes in Kant's metaethics, and their implications for such details must wait for another occasion.

(4) Finally, since the basic idea is familiar to contemporary readers and there are significant disagreements concerning its details, I do not attempt to explain the nature of the is-ought gap (assuming there even is a single such gap). I also sometimes characterize it as the descriptive-normative gap, though some metaethicists would

distinguish those gaps. There are, however, different sorts of “ought”s. I am primarily concerned with practical “ought”s, which concern how we ought to *act*, whether prudentially, instrumentally, or morally. In §3, I am also concerned with epistemic or theoretical “ought”s, which concern how we ought to reason and judge. There are, however, at least two other sorts of “ought”s I do not consider: the semantic “ought” and the teleological “ought.” Some philosophers believe that any representation with general content must involve some form of semantic normativity. I remain neutral on this issue in what follows, though there are grounds for thinking Kant would have been sympathetic.² In addition, Kant often uses strongly teleological language in describing our faculties, especially reason (for instance, see A307/B364, A326-28/B383-84, *GMS* 4:395). How seriously we should take such language, and whether it is normative in some way, is a difficult question.³ Many of Kant’s readers have taken issues of semantic and teleological normativity to be distinct from Kant’s main views on practical rationality, however, and I do as well. When I talk of a notion being non-normative below, I mean to deny only that the notion is practically and epistemically normative.

1. Textual motivation for Analytic Equivalence

Analytic Equivalence states that Kant holds that “S ought to F” is analytically equivalent to “If, as it can and would were there no other influences on the will, S’s faculty of reason determined S’s willing, S would F.” This takes Kant to be offering a definition of “ought.” For Kant, “ought” [*Sollen*] is a central normative notion, perhaps the central practical normative notion. In his 1783 review of Johann Schulz’s book on morality, Kant says that the “ought” or the imperative “distinguishes the practical law

² For a relevant discussion, see Ginsborg 2008 (but cf. Tolley 2006).

³ See Johnson 2005. For discussion of the complications involved in Kant’s use of teleology, see Ameriks 2012, Chapter 11 and Mensch 2013. As Karl Schafer pointed out to me, an appeal to Kant’s teleological views could potentially provide the basis for an objection to Non-Normative Freedom. A proper discussion of this issue would require more space than I have here, but it is worth noting that at *GMS* 4:396 Kant seems to suggest that the purpose of reason is to posterior to its moral properties. If that is correct, then reason’s teleological properties do not play a role in defining its moral properties.

from the law of nature" (8:13, cf. *GMS* 4:413). So if Analytic Equivalence is right, it promises to shed light on Kant's central moral notion. In this section, I argue that there is a plausible reading of Kant that supports Analytic Equivalence. In Section 2, I then argue that attributing this view to Kant has significant interpretive payoffs.

1.1 The core textual motivation for Analytic Equivalence

The passage that most directly supports Analytic Equivalence is Kant's introduction of "ought" in *KprV*:

A practical rule is always a product of reason ... But for a being in whom reason quite alone is not the determining ground of the will, this rule is an imperative, that is, a rule indicated by an 'ought' [*Sollen*], which ... signifies that [*bedeutet, dass*] if [*wenn*] reason completely determined [*gänzlich bestimmte*] the will the action would without fail take place in accordance with this rule." (*KprV* 5:20)⁴

My focus is on the last part of this passage, where Kant tells us what "ought" signifies.⁵ In glossing this claim as Analytic Equivalence, I am taking the "signifies" ("*bedeutet*") to describe an analytic relation. This requires some defense. A less pressing issue is how to understand the "if" ("*wenn*"). I discuss each point in turn.⁶

⁴ On the basis of this passage, one might predict that the *theoretical* "ought" would signify that if reason completely determined our faculty of judgment, some judgment would without fail take place. However, for reasons discussed in §3, that would seem to imply that we ought to accept transcendental illusions, and that is not Kant's view. Given Non-Normative Freedom, this is less of a puzzle for my reading than for others, but it still calls for explanation.

⁵ The "ought" here is supposedly involved in both categorical and hypothetical imperatives. My focus will be on the former below, but my proposal naturally extends to the latter.

⁶ Another difficult question here is what *determining* (*bestimmen*) amounts to. While Kant sometimes uses the term for causation (e.g., *MFNS* 4:508, 4:521), he more often uses it to describe something being made more metaphysically determinate/specific (e.g., A186/B229, A571-72/B599-600), or being represented more specifically (e.g., Bx). None of these involve (non-semantic) normativity in any obvious way. The best gloss for the *KprV* 5:20 passage is probably in terms of

1.2 “bedeutet dass” as analytic equivalence

Unlike Frege, Kant never explicitly discusses what he means by “bedeuten”/“Bedeutung” (contrasted with *Sinn* or otherwise). Moreover, some of his uses of these terms clearly do not concern the sort of meaning revealed by analysis. For instance, in Section 13 of *KrV*, he says that were appearances sufficiently confused, the concepts of cause and effect would be “ohne Bedeutung” (A90/B123). Presumably, confusion among appearances could not deprive concepts of their meaning in the sense of meaning that is relevant to analyticity. Similarly, at A71/B96, Kant appears to use the term to compare the extensions of predicates. Arguably, a concept’s extension should be distinguished from the meaning that analysis concerns.⁷

Nonetheless, many of Kant's uses of these terms plausibly do concern the sort of meaning revealed by analysis. Perhaps his most common use of “bedeuten”/“Bedeutung” is in discussions of ambiguities (*Zweideutigkeiten*). In *KprV*, he uses it to disambiguate the expression “*sub ratione boni*” (*KprV* 5:59n.) and the term “highest” (*KprV* 5:110). The latter passage runs as follows: “The concept of the *highest* already contains an ambiguity that, if not attended to, can occasion needless disputes. The highest can mean [*bedeuten*] either the supreme... or the complete.” Kant is here pointing to a difference in meaning that can be avoided with attention. It is hard to see how this could concern anything other than analyticity.⁸

metaphysical specificity. For the will to be made more specific, as the capacity to act in accordance with rational representations, would just be for it to act on a specific representation instead of others (e.g., that of universal law instead of mere inclination).

⁷ Concerning A71/B96, Guyer and Wood note: “Kant here uses *Bedeutung*... to mean the reference or denotation of the concept.” They go on to say, however, that “more typically, he uses it to mean something closer to what Frege called *Sinn* or sense, that is, the connotation” (Guyer and Wood 1998, 207).

⁸ These terms also appear in the *KrV*'s disambiguations of “object” (Bxxvi), “analogy” (A179/B222), “absolute” (A324-25/B380-81), “noumenon” (B307), “idea” (A312/B369), “thought” (B411-12), and “draw a line” (A511/B539).

In addition, the *KprV* 5:20 passage uses a propositional construction as opposed to an object construction: “signifies that” / “*bedeutet dass*.” This construction is most easily read in analytic terms (see A493/B521). So while Kant’s use of “*bedeutet*” is not consistent, it is most naturally read in *KprV* 5:20 as concerning analytic relations.

1.3 “*wenn*” as a power-indicating counterfactual

If the claim of the previous subsection is right, then *KprV* 5:20 can be read as saying that “S ought to F” just means that if S’s reason completely determined S’s will, S would F. For this to support Analytic Equivalence, however, the “if” needs to mean “if, as it can and would were there no other influences on the will.” This is not the only way to understand the “if” (perhaps one could read it as a simple material conditional), but I think it makes the most sense of how Kant ties “ought” claims to the freedom of beings whose will can also be determined by sensible inclinations (that is, finite agents). In the *KprV* 5:20 passage, and in others I discuss below, that tie is the semantic point that Kant seems most concerned with. Spelled out this way, the claim can be read as a description of a motivational power (reason) that is in conflict with others. This tension would be one common to all humans. No such conflict is found in a perfect will like God’s, however, which is why imperatives do not apply to God.

1.4 Related claim in *GMS*

Though the *KprV* 5:20 passage is the best motivation for attributing Analytic Equivalence to Kant, there are also grounds in *GMS*, where Kant claims:

this ‘ought’ is strictly speaking a ‘will’ that holds for every rational being under the condition that reason in him is practical without hindrance; but for beings like us... that necessity of action is called only an ‘ought,’ and the subjective necessity is distinguished from the objective (*GMS* 4:449)⁹

⁹ See also *Metaphysics of Morals* 6:222 on obligation and imperatives.

It is not obvious how to understand the “is strictly speaking” (“*ist eigentlich*”) relation that Kant asserts holds between this “ought” and “will.” If Analytic Equivalence is correct, though, then we can give a clear sense to this passage. Kant is then saying that there is a relation in the meaning of “ought” and “will,” such that “S ought to F” means “If S’s reason were practical without hindrance (i.e., completely determined the will), S would F.”

2. Indirect interpretive motivation for Analytic Equivalence

The previous section argued that Kant’s most prominent claim about “ought” in *KprV* directly supports Analytic Equivalence. At least as important as that direct support, though, is how this proposal can make sense of an otherwise puzzling feature of Kant’s metaethics: his claim that morality and freedom mutually imply one another.

To get this result, one further assumption is needed: that what is described in the right half of Analytic Equivalence (“if, as it can and would were there no other influences on the will, S’s faculty of reason determined S’s willing, S would F”) captures what Kant means by freedom. This assumption is not trivial, but it is defensible (see the §3.2 and §3.3 below for some of the relevant passages).

In *KrV*, *GMS*, and in *KprV*, Kant makes a number of statements about freedom and morality implying one another, sometimes mentioning analyticity explicitly. Here are some of his stronger statements:

practical freedom... presupposes that although something has not happened, it nevertheless *ought* to have happened, and its cause in the appearance was thus not so determining that there is not a causality in our power of choice such that... it ... might begin a series of occurrences entirely from itself. (A534/B562)¹⁰

that this reason has causality, or that we can at least represent something of the sort in it, is clear from the *imperatives* that we propose as rules to our power of execution in everything practical. The *ought* expresses a species

¹⁰ I am setting aside the question of whether practical freedom differs from transcendental freedom (see, e.g., A533-34/B561-62).

of necessity and a connection with grounds which does not occur anywhere else in the whole of nature. (A547/B575)

If, therefore, freedom of the will is presupposed, morality together with its principle follows from it by mere analysis (GMS 4:447)

morality... must be derived solely from the property of freedom (GMS 4:447)

freedom is real, for this idea reveals itself through the moral law (KprV 5:4)

freedom and unconditional practical law reciprocally imply each other... the moral law... leads directly to the concept of freedom. (KprV 5:29-30).

[consciousness of the moral law] would be analytic if the freedom of the will were presupposed (KprV 5:31)

the moral law... is still something in itself positive – namely, the form of an intellectual causality, that is, of freedom (KprV 5:73)¹¹

To be sure, Kant sometimes talks of the analytic in describing things other than analytic semantic relations (e.g., the analytic method of the *Prolegomena* (4:263), and the analytic unity of apperception (B133n.)). In addition, nowhere does he claim that implication relations are always based on analytic relations. Nonetheless, analytic relations are surely *included* in inferential relations (see A303-04/B360), and it is not obvious how to understand his mention of analyticity in the above passages except in terms of analytic semantic relations. The most straightforward way to understand how freedom and morality could reciprocally imply one another is if they are analytically equivalent.¹²

¹¹ One of Kant's pre-Critical reflections is also striking: "On freedom: We can consider one of our actions either as something that happens, i.e., as an appearance, or as something that ought to happen, i.e., as an intuition of self-activity for possible effects" (R4334, 17:508-09, my emphasis).

¹² Strictly speaking, the moral "ought" does not express only the moral law, since imperatives only hold for imperfectly rational beings, while the moral law holds for imperfectly and perfectly rational beings. But all that is needed is to drop the counterfactual part of the description of freedom so as to remain neutral on

While many of Kant's readers have pointed out that Kant thinks the claims of morality point to or even "reveal" our freedom to us, few have attempted to explain the exact nature of that epistemic relation.¹³

One might worry that Analytic Equivalence makes freedom and morality *too* close. Kant insists that our consciousness of morality is prior to our consciousness of freedom (e.g., *KprV* 5:5n.). On my reading, however, these 'consciousnesses' are analytically equivalent representations, and it may be hard to see how one could be prior to the other. However, thoughts can differ in ways besides meaning. The concept "ought," on my reading, involves a *unified* grasp of concepts of the will, reason, and determination. The latter concepts are "covertly" ("*versteckter Weise*" (A6/B10)) contained in the former, and "already thought in it (though confusedly)" (A7/B11). So there is an action required to derive one from the other, namely, a judgment of clarification, and this makes one thought prior to the other.¹⁴

A related point is that Analytic Equivalence makes sense of how imperatives can be analytic or synthetic, something Kant explicitly claims (e.g., *GMS* 4:417, 4:420). Dieter Schönecker objects that such claims, strictly speaking, make no sense, because imperatives do not express propositions (Schönecker 2013, 232). Analytic Equivalence

whether reason alone determines the will. Analytic Equivalence captures this well enough.

¹³ Irwin holds that, for Kant, the claims of morality reveal our practical freedom to us (Irwin 2009, 80-82), though Irwin seems to think the relevant notion of freedom is essentially normative. Others (e.g., Tolley 2006, Allison 2011, Schönecker 2013) have claimed that there is an analytic relation between the idea of a *holy* will and the moral law in a non-imperative form, but have stopped short of claiming that this holds for beings like us and imperatives. Schafer Forthcoming comes closest to the present proposal.

¹⁴ A further issue here is whether my reading makes freedom too close to be the *ratio essendi* of the moral law (*KprV* 5:5n.). This is a subtle point, but even in Plato's *Euthyphro*, 'in virtue of' relations are claimed to hold between what are, in effect, analytically equivalent facts (e.g., someone is carried in virtue of someone carrying). In addition, contemporary metaphysicians who think disjunctions are grounded in their disjuncts would allow that A-or-A holds in virtue of A holding (see Fine 2012). A-or-A might or might not be analytically equivalent to A, but that equivalence is similarly trivial and a priori.

implies otherwise, for it entails that Kant took imperatives to indeed express propositions, and so be evaluable for analyticity the same way as other judgments.

3. In support of Non-Normative Freedom

Non-Normative Freedom states that Kant's notions of reason, the will, and (thereby) freedom are all non-normative. The notion of reason here is of the *faculty* of reason. To modern ears, talk about the faculty of reason might sound like talk about our capacity to respond to reasons.¹⁵ Many philosophers think that reasons cannot be characterized non-normatively, some even holding that it is *the* central normative notion. Yet Non-Normative Freedom says only that the most fundamental characterization of the faculty of reason Kant describes (*Vernunft*) is in non-normative terms. Whether Kant accepts that we also have the capacity to respond to normative reasons (in the contemporary sense) is a separate question. If my overall proposal is correct, then he presumably would see such a normative capacity as built up out of non-normative elements, such the faculty of reason in his sense. But that is not my concern in this section.

In making my textual case for attributing Non-Normative Freedom to Kant, I begin with the most difficult topic: Kant's notion of reason. Since Kant's notions of the will and of freedom are closely tied to that of reason, showing that we can understand his notion of reason as non-normative provides a basis for showing that the same holds for the other notions.

3.1. Reason as non-normative

¹⁵ For instance: "Reason is the universal capacity to recognise reasons, one which in principle enables us to recognise any reason which applies to us, and to respond to it appropriately" (Raz 2010, 6). Many of Kant's readers assimilate Kant's talk of the faculty of reason to contemporary reasons-talk without argument (e.g., Irwin 2009, 1-2, Wood 2009, 16-20). For a more historically-sensitive interpretation of the role of normativity in Kant's understanding of mental faculties, see Anderson 2001.

Consider the notion of a capacity for moral knowledge or practical wisdom. This is a normative notion, in my sense, because it is part of the notion that such a capacity is *good to have* or *correct* in some respect. By contrast, I do not count the capacity for thought as normative, even though that is a capacity that can have normative representations. My aim here is to show that there are textual grounds for thinking that Kant's notion of the capacity of reason (*Vernunft*) is non-normative. As before, I allow that other interpretations can accommodate the passages I appeal to. I only claim that the reading I have described is defensible. I also allow that, for Kant, reason has a necessary relation to the normative. I only deny that this relation is built into the notion of reason itself.

A key premise in my discussion here is that theoretical and practical reason are, at root, the same faculty: "there can, in the end, be only one and the same reason, which must be distinguished merely in its application" (*GMS* 4:391). This means that Kant's discussion of reason in the *KrV* can shed light on his practical works, such as the key passage from *KprV* 5:20 discussed above. With that in place, I turn to two lines of argument for taking Kant's notion of reason to be non-normative.

The first line of argument rests on the fact that Kant's characterizations of the faculty of reason in the *KrV* are non-normative. These characterizations are not entirely consistent, not least because Kant had wider and narrower senses of "reason" (see A130-31/B169-70, A835/B863). Nonetheless, his clearest definitions of reason in the general sense are focused on the quantitative content of its representations, in particular, their generality. In the Dialectic of the *KrV*, Kant says that the "universal concept of the faculty of reason" is "the faculty of the unity of the rules of understanding under principles" (A302/B359, cf. A299/B356). Later, Kant says that "[r]eason, considered as the faculty of a certain logical form of cognition, is the faculty of inferring, i.e., of judging mediately" (A330/B386), which Kant thinks is part of the "demand of reason" (A332/B389) for the unconditioned totality of conditions (e.g., the idea of the world-whole).¹⁶ What I want to draw from this now is that Kant characterizes reason here

¹⁶ Such passages suggest that Kant sees reason as having an aim of some sort, and so perhaps as involving a certain sort of teleological normativity. Yet Kant

essentially as the capacity to form certain representations, representations that are distinguished primarily by their quantitative content (the generality of principles, or the unconditioned totality of their series). These characterizations do not say that reason is a *good* capacity to have, or that these representations are *correct*.¹⁷ Assuming that these characterizations are supposed to provide an analysis of the notion of reason, the *KrV* therefore provides grounds for taking Kant's notion of reason to be non-normative.

Kant gives a similar characterization of reason in the first introduction to *KU*, where he describes reason as "the faculty for the determination of the particular through the general [*Allgemeine*] (for the derivation from principles [*Principien*])" (20:201, cf. A300/B357)¹⁸, and we can see a similar idea in *KprV*'s claim that "[o]nly rationalism of judgment is suitable for use of moral concepts, since it takes from sensible nature nothing more than what pure reason can also think for itself, that is, conformity with law" (*KprV* 5:71). The conformity of sensible nature with law is presumably a matter of its conformity with physical laws, and so something non-normative.

It is hard to precisely characterize the quantitative content that is distinctive of reason's representations. It is not hard to see, however, how the above passages can be read as defining a capacity in terms of certain representations without implying anything about the goodness or correctness of that capacity. This capacity could still be a component in good things (like the good will) and can lead to bad things (like the illusions of dogmatic metaphysics, discussed below), but the notion of the capacity itself is not normative.

While Kant's characterizations of reason focus on its distinctive representations, he also claims that it (along with understanding) has a distinctive metaphysical status:

does not give such teleology any clear place in his core characterizations of reason.

¹⁷ One could insist that the action of *inferring* [*schliessen*], for Kant, is always correct, so that his characterization of reason as the faculty of inferring would be at least epistemically normative. While some passages suggest as much, Kant also speaks of *sophistical inferences* (*Schlüsse*), which he says "have sprung from the nature of reason" (A339/B397).

¹⁸ See also *KU* 5:250, 5:255 on reason's being distinguished from the imagination in virtue of its ability to represent the absolutely infinite.

being a spontaneous, noumenal faculty. In *KrV* he states that “in regard to certain faculties, [the human being] is a merely intelligible object, because the actions of this object cannot at all be ascribed to the receptivity of sensibility. We call these faculties understanding and reason” (A546-47/B574-75), where Kant has just defined “intelligible” as “that in an object of sense that is not itself appearance” (A538/B566) and made it clear that this is noumenal (A541/B569). Similar claims appear in *GMS* and *KprV* (e.g. *GMS* 4:452, *KprV* 5:97-98). Some of Kant's readers have claimed that spontaneity and noumenality are normative notions,¹⁹ but this a fairly radical interpretation. As Kant presents them, spontaneity and noumenality seem to be metaphysical notions that enter into normative notions, but are themselves non-normative. Hence, their connection to the notion of reason does not support seeing the latter as normative.

The second line of argument for this conclusion about Kant's notion of reason comes from the evaluative claims Kant makes about reason in the *KrV*. Strikingly, Kant says that, in the Transcendental Dialectic, his aim is to “determine and evaluate the influence and the *worth* of pure reason” (A319/B376, my emphasis). This would be an odd claim to make if his notion of reason were normative, for then facts about its worth would be built into the very notion of reason. By analogy, we would be more surprised to hear someone ask about the worth of practical wisdom (whose notion is normative) than about the worth of moral belief (whose notion is not).

Moreover, Kant's conclusions about the worth of reason in the *KrV* are, on the whole, negative. There, Kant describes at length how the illusions of dogmatic metaphysics (“sophistries... of pure reason itself” (A339/B397)) arise from the faculty of reason, and claims that certain representations arising from reason end up being “self-contradictory” (A340/B398). Now, if Kant's notion of reason were theoretically or

¹⁹ E.g. Allison 2012, 113, Skorupski 2010, Ch. 19. Korsgaard says that “[t]he trouble with the way Kant phrases the argument in *Groundwork III* is that it can make it sound as if ... [he is] deriving a normative sensible ‘ought’ from a descriptive intelligible ‘is.’ But he is not, for the laws of the intelligible world are normative through and through.” (Korsgaard 1996, 219). Of course, denying that spontaneity is a normative notion is consistent with saying that there is a norm directing us to be spontaneous (see Merritt 2009).

practically normative, we would expect it to be normative in some *positive* way. The notions of practical wisdom and moral knowledge are positive in this sense: they are capacities that are, *by definition*, good, or get things right. By contrast, the notion of moral ignorance would be normative in a negative way: a capacity that, by definition, missed out on moral facts. Yet Kant clearly regards the illusions of dogmatic metaphysics in a primarily negative light. Since he directly attributes these illusions to reason, and does not seem to have a negatively normative notion of reason, there are grounds for taking him to understand reason in a non-normative way.²⁰

It may be useful to look more closely at some of the relevant passages. In the A edition Preface, Kant describes human reason as “burdened with questions which it cannot dismiss, since they are given to it as problems by the nature of reason itself” (Avii). In the B edition Preface, Kant states that metaphysics is “a wholly isolated speculative cognition of reason” (Bxiv). The problems of metaphysics are, in fact, the main motivation he gives for undertaking a critique of *pure* reason at all. The Transcendental Dialectic of the *KrV* describes these problems in detail, and it begins by describing how they arise from reason itself (see A310/B366-A340/B398). There, Kant describes how, in contrast to the faculty of understanding, “reason in its attempts to make out something about objects a priori... is wholly and entirely dialectical” (A131-32/B170-71). “Dialectical” is a term of condemnation for Kant that is closely connected with illusion (see A61/B85, A131/B170, A293/B349). In fact, the title for the second section of the Dialectic is “On pure reason as the seat of transcendental illusion” (A298/B355). When, near the end of the Dialectic, he comes to the metaphysical proof he most strongly condemns, Kant states: “[i]n this cosmological argument so many sophisticated principles come together that speculative reason seems to have summoned up all its dialectical art so as to produce the greatest possible transcendental illusion” (A606/B634). Kant attributes this argument to reason, but he clearly does not think we should accept it or act on it. Such attributions can be plausibly read as involving a notion

²⁰ I am assuming that it is unlikely that the notion of reason is both positively and negatively normative (as opposed to reason becoming so when other factors are added). For similar points, see Ameriks 2012, 196, Chignell 2014, 267. Grier 2001, Ch. 4 and Ch. 8 is in a similar spirit.

of reason that is not positively normative, and so (given that it is unlikely the notion is negatively normative) not normative at all.

To be sure, there are some passages in the Dialectic that do suggest a positive, normative understanding of reason (e.g. since reason is the “highest court of appeals for all rights and claims of our speculation[, it] cannot possibly contain original deceptions and semblances” (A669/B697)), and Kant gives a positive, regulatory role to the ideas of reason. Yet Kant’s writing outside *KrV* contains further negative statements, often with reminders of the Dialectic. At the beginning of *KprV*, in fact, Kant reminds us that speculative reason (the topic of *KrV*), “presumptuously oversteps itself” (*KprV* 5:3), right before discussing the nature of that same faculty (reason) in its practical capacity. There are grounds, then, for thinking that when Kant talks of reason, his notion is not normative, though it undoubtedly plays a role in certain normative contexts.

3.2 *The will as non-normative*

Non-Normative Freedom also claims that Kant’s notion of the will is non-normative. Kant definitionally ties the will to reason,²¹ so we should expect the normative status of the two notions to be similar.

In the *GMS*, Kant claims that “the will is nothing other than practical reason” (*GMS* 4:412). One might suspect that “practical” here is a normative term, but Kant spells it out primarily in causal terms. At the beginning of *GMS* 3, he defines “will” as “a kind of causality of living beings insofar as they are rational [*vernünftig*]” (*GMS* 4:446).²² In *KprV*, Kant seems to maintain this view. In light of Kant’s way of characterizing

²¹ The *GMS* and the *KprV* do not (explicitly) make the distinction between *Wille* and *Willkür* that is found in Kant’s later works (e.g., *Metaphysics of Morals* 6:226). The definitional connection between *Wille* and reason is stronger than that between *Willkür* and reason. The crucial *KprV* 5:20 passage concerns *Willkür*, however, and that is my focus here.

²² In *KrV* Kant identifies reason’s *producing* actions with “reason in a practical respect” (A550/B578). Similarly, in *KprV*: “pure reason can be practical – that is, can of itself, independently of anything empirical, determine the will” (*KprV* 5:42).

reason in general, it is not surprising to see him also describe the will there as “the ability [of rational beings] to determine their causality by the representations of rules” (*KprV* 5:32).²³ Some of Kant’s other descriptions of the will do not directly refer to reason, but, in a similar vein to the above passages, talk of causation and representations. The first description in the *KprV*, for instance, states that “the will... is a faculty either of producing objects corresponding to representations or of determining itself to effect such objects (whether the physical power is sufficient or not), that is, of determining its causality” (*KprV* 5:15). Similarly, in *KU*, Kant says that “[t]he faculty of desire, insofar as it is determinable only through concepts, i.e., to act in accordance with the representation of an end, would be the will” (*KU* 5:220).

In Kant’s definitions of “will,” then, the ingredient notion that most obviously calls out for a normative understanding is that of reason. The other notions seem to concern causation and representation, and so do not seem to involve normativity. Yet if reason can be understood as non-normative, then the same would be true of the will.

3.3 Freedom as non-normative

The final notion to consider for Non-Normative Freedom is that of freedom. Kant has more than one notion of freedom, but as with his notion of will, it is plausible that whether these notions are normative hinges on whether his notion of reason is.

Some of Kant’s descriptions of freedom are negative, focusing on how we are not determined by external causes. Following the definition of the will as causality in rational beings in *GMS* 3, he describes freedom as “that property of such causality that it can be efficient independent of alien causes determining it” (*GMS* 4:446). Similarly, in *KprV*, he says that “freedom in the strictest, that is, in the transcendental sense” is being “independent of the natural law of appearances in their relations to one another” (*KprV* 5:29), and that “the concept of a being that has free will is the concept of a *causa noumenon*” (*KprV* 5:55). Beyond whatever may be included in the concept of a will,

²³ Similarly: “the understanding... has... a relation to the faculty of desire, which is therefore called the will and is called the pure will insofar as the pure understanding (which in this case is called reason) is practical through the mere representation of a law” (*KprV* 5:55).

nothing obviously normative is involved in such definitions, which is presumably why Kant ties *KprV*'s notion of freedom to that described in the Dialectic of *KrV* (see *KprV* 5:15). In *KrV*, freedom "in the practical sense" is described as "the independence of the power of choice from necessitation by impulses of sensibility" (A534/B562), while freedom in the "cosmological sense" is just "the faculty of beginning a state from itself" (A533/B561).

Kant's positive descriptions of freedom concern autonomy. While "autonomy" is sometimes used today as a normative notion, Kant's initial explanation of it in *GMS* does not invoke anything obviously normative. In *GMS*, he says that "freedom, although it is not a property of the will in accordance with natural laws... must instead be a causality in accordance with immutable laws but of a special kind... what, then, can freedom of the will be other than autonomy, that is, the will's property of being a law to itself?" (*GMS* 4:446-47). The talk of "being a law" is the most obscure part of this passage, but the earlier clauses make room for understanding it as causality in accordance with a certain type of law, one based in reason. The same is true for Kant's introduction of the notion of autonomy in *KprV*, where autonomy is described as "this lawgiving of its own on the part of pure, and as such, practical reason" (*KprV* 5:33). The notion of lawgiving can be understood normatively, but Kant's comparison of the lawgiving of reason with the laws of nature at least allows us to understand it non-normatively, on analogy with God's giving physical laws to finite bodies. If so, then reason gives a law by generating a certain structure for our activity.

To be clear: I am not claiming that Kant's theory of the autonomous will becomes less mysterious overall if we see the relevant notions as non-normative. Normativity itself is (arguably) mysterious, and taking some of Kant's notions as intrinsically normative would give us a familiar *categorization* for the mysteriousness of passages like the above. However, making a mystery more familiar is not a decisive advantage for an interpretation. As I discuss in §4, Non-Normative Freedom offers some significant interpretive pay-offs, especially if accepted along with Analytic Equivalence.

4. Indirect interpretive motivation for accepting Non-Normative Freedom and Analytic Equivalence

The conjunction of Analytic Equivalence and Non-Normative Freedom calls for further defense. In this section, I describe the pay-off for accepting that conjunction. In the next, I begin considering objections to doing so.

The main pay-off of my conjunctive proposal is straightforward: it offers us an especially clear, systematically cohesive picture of Kant's philosophy. On my proposal, there is no conceptual gap in Kant's philosophy between the non-normative and the normative. Kant introduces reason in *KrV* along with the basic concepts of laws and the will, and appears to give them non-normative characterizations. My proposal takes the central normative notion of his practical philosophy to be defined in terms of these (though that does not imply that everything in Kant's practical philosophy is analytic). To the best of my knowledge, no other interpretive approach yields a comparably straightforward way of putting together the differences pieces of Kant's views on reason and morality.

If my proposal is correct, then "ought" claims describe a motivational tension in the human will. This tension can be seen as the practical parallel of what happens in the theoretical case. In a passage partly quoted above, Kant describes the theoretical tension in quite metaphysical terms:

error is effected only through the unnoticed influence of sensibility on understanding, through which it happens that the subjective grounds of the judgment join with the objective ones, and make the latter deviate from their destination just as a moved body would of itself always stay in a straight line in the same direction, but starts off on a curved line if at the same time another force influences it in another direction. In order to distinguish the proper action of the understanding from the force that meddles in, it will thus be necessary to regard the erroneous judgment of the understanding as a diagonal between two forces that determine the judgment in two different directions, enclosing an angle, so to speak, and to resolve the composite effect into the simple effects of the understanding and of sensibility (A294-95/B350-51)

Reason would be a force that determines the will towards certain actions, while, for beings like us, sensible inclinations influence the will in a different way. Taking "ought"

judgments to describe this ties Kant's philosophy together in a straightforward way.²⁴ This extends to his notion of autonomy (which is central to his moral philosophy), since the actions of reason, like those of understanding, would be *our own* actions, not those of outside influences (see *KrV* B153-158, *GMS* 4:457). This can be seen as a metaphysical fact, however, not a normative one.²⁵

5. Interpretive objections and replies

This section addresses three potential objections concerning the relation between my interpretation and Kant's other views. The next section considers the worry that, by denying the is-ought gap, my interpretation uncharitably attributes an implausible view to Kant.

5.1. Analyticity and obviousness

The first potential objection is as follows: Kant takes some time to spell out the relation between reason, the free will, and the moral "ought." But if this relation were analytic, then he would have thought it was obvious, and so would not have spent so much time describing it.

In reply: Kant does not think that analytic relations are always obvious. He holds that the analysis of philosophical concepts is much more difficult than the analysis of mathematical concepts: "in philosophy [in contrast to mathematics] the definition... must conclude rather than begin the work" (A730-31/B758-59). The reason for this is that mathematical concepts are constructed. Since we have deliberately created these

²⁴ Cf. Kant's discussion of the feeling of humiliation in *KprV* 5:78-79. For a helpful discussion of Kant's views on reason as a causal power that fits with my proposal, see Wuerth 2010. For some relevant concerns about understanding Kant's view of the will on analogy with conflicting forces, see Baron 1999, 219-220, Reath 2006, 12-13, and Korsgaard 2008, 100-101. I do not directly address these concerns here, though I hope that what I say below provides some resources for answering them.

²⁵ For an interpretation of Kant's view of the self that supports this, see Marshall 2010.

concepts, analyzing them is a straightforward matter. Concepts like those involved in morality, however, were not constructed, and this makes their analysis much more difficult. Hence, he reminds us early in *KprV* that the “complete analysis of the concept... is often achieved very late” (5:10n.).

In addition, Kant thought that otherwise insightful philosophers (such as Hume and Leibniz) had mis-classified judgments as analytic vs. synthetic. Kant spends some time arguing that properly mathematical judgments like “7+5=12” are synthetic (B15-16, *Prolegomena* 4:268-69). Further, at least part of his diagnosis of the errors of rational psychology is that merely analytic facts about the “I think” are mistaken for synthetic judgments (B409).²⁶

Kant therefore does not think all analytic relations were obvious. Not only is philosophical analysis itself difficult, but people sometimes fail to recognize which judgments are analytic. Under such circumstances, it would make sense to spend some time spelling out important analytic relations.

5.2. *The gap Kant draws*

The second potential objection runs as follows: against the present interpretive proposal, Kant himself draws a strong is-ought gap on multiple occasions. After all, Kant begins the *Groundwork* by endorsing the classical division of ethics from physics and logic (*GMS* 4:387).

This worry may be the main reason why the interpretation I have described has not been seriously considered. However, while Kant does insist on two sorts of gap concerning morality, the gaps he describes are the gaps between (a) empirical facts and

²⁶ Another significant example is the Metaphysical Deduction of the Categories. Kant thinks that (e.g.) the concept of causation is derived from the hypothetical form of judgment. Whether or not he takes this to be analytic is not clear, but Kant seems to regard it as being as certain as any analytic truth. Nonetheless, despite his brief discussion, he must have thought that the relation between forms of judgment and categories had been entirely missed by all previous philosophers.

moral facts and between (b) theoretical and practical reason. Both such gaps are consistent with my proposal.

When describing the distinctiveness of morality, Kant's main insistence is that morality cannot be derived from facts about the empirical world. Here is a representative passage:

In practical philosophy... we have to do not with assuming grounds for what happens but rather with laws for what ought to happen even if it never does... Here... it is a question of objective practical laws... for then everything that has reference to the empirical falls away of itself, since if reason entirely by itself determines conduct... it must necessarily do so a priori (*GMS* 4:427, see also A318-19/B375, A547/B575, A802/B830)

Kant does hold that we cannot figure out what ought to happen on the basis of what happens, but *what happens* (a temporal notion) concerns the empirical world. As noted in Section 3.1, Kant does not think reason is an empirical faculty. Here, his main point is that empirical facts cannot settle the question of whether reason can determine conduct. This description, connected with the “ought” earlier in the passage, is just what we should expect if my proposal is correct.

While the main gap Kant insists on is the gap from the empirical, he also posits a gap between theoretical and practical reason. This gap seems to be less deep. In the final section of *GMS*, Kant seems to argue that the spontaneity of theoretical reason in ideas provides grounds for accepting the reality of practical reason (*GMS* 4:452).²⁷ Nonetheless, Kant treats theoretical and practical reason at least somewhat separately – hence the division between the first two *Critiques* (see *KprV* 5:3). Hence, when Kant discusses the distinctive status of practical reason and the moral law, he emphasizes that their reality can be proved neither through experience nor through any exercise of theoretical reason:

whatever needs to draw the evidence for its reality from experience must

²⁷ It is unclear whether Kant continues to hold this in the *KprV*. For an influential discussion, see Ameriks 1981. For a nice discussion of the theoretical/practical contrast in Kant, see Schafer Manuscript.

be dependent for the grounds of its possibility upon principles of experience, whereas pure but practical reason, by its very concept, cannot possibly be held to be dependent in this way. Moreover the moral law is given... as a fact of pure reason... though it be granted that no example of exact observance of it can be found in experience. Hence the objective reality of the moral law cannot be proved by any deduction, by any efforts of theoretical reason, speculative or empirically supported (*KprV* 5:47, cf. A84-85/B116-17)

Kant seems to treat practical reason and the moral law similarly here. If, as I suggested above, practical reason is a matter of reason's being able to determine the will, then all Kant is saying is that neither experience nor any other exercise of theoretical reason can establish the fact that reason can determine the will. That is consistent with my proposal.

5.3 *The limits of cognition*

I have claimed that "ought" facts analytically imply certain facts about reason, which is noumenal. However, one might object that this violates Kant's strictures on the bounds of cognition. Though Kant thinks we must *assume* or *postulate* noumenal freedom, my proposal, when combined with the plausible assumption that we know some "ought" facts, may seem to imply that we have more noumenal knowledge than Kant would allow.²⁸

A full reply to this worry would require spelling out Kant's general theory of cognition. I do not attempt such a full reply here. I instead just note that there are passages where Kant seems to make strong epistemological claims about supersensible freedom, such as:

there is now disclosed a very satisfying confirmation of the speculative *Critique's* consistent way of thinking... now practical reason of itself, without any collusion with speculative reason, furnishes reality to a supersensible object of the category of causality, namely to freedom (although, as a practical concept, only for practical use), and hence establishes by means of a fact what could there [in the first *Critique*] could only be thought (5:6)

²⁸ For a worry along these lines, see Skorupski 2010, 487.

Here, Kant claims that the fact established by practical reason is the same fact that was thought in the *KrV*, which is almost certainly meant to be about the thought of freedom Kant describes in the resolution to the Third Antinomy (A532-58/B560-86). The latter is non-normative and, as it is described in the resolution, is clearly supersensible. On the natural reading of the above passage, Kant seems to be saying that the practical lets us *establish* something about supersensible freedom. This is what we should expect if my proposal were correct. To be sure, there is a further question of how to make these sorts of affirmations consistent with (e.g.) his claim that if we remove the categories (including causation) from “conditions of sensibility... all significance, i.e., relation to the object, disappears” (A241/B300).²⁹ But all interpretations face that question.

6. The big philosophical objection, and a tentative reply

This section turns to the most important potential objection to my proposal, namely, that some form of the is-ought gap must be endorsed by any good metaethicist, so that denying that Kant accepts it is unacceptably uncharitable.

The best way to respond to this objection would be to directly cast doubt on the existence of an is-ought gap. Instead of attempting that, I respond by making a methodological point and then arguing that, on my reading, Kant can accommodate most of the intuitions behind the two most famous statements of the is-ought gap.

The methodological point is this: as Hume presents it, the is-ought gap has been overlooked in “every system of morality” which he has “hitherto met with” (*Treatise* 3.1.1.27). Perhaps Hume is being hyperbolic, but he seems to be taking himself to be offering a novel insight. As far as we know, Kant had limited access to Hume’s *Treatise*, and never carefully studied Book 3. So even if Hume is right about the philosophical issues, his insight might well be one that Kant simply never considered. This weakens

²⁹ For some thoughts about how to make sense of the Phenomena and Noumena chapter (from which this latter claim is drawn), see my Marshall 2010, 5-6, which follows the general line described in Findlay 1981 and Adams 1997. See Schafer (this volume) and Schafer Manuscript for helpful discussions.

the appeal to charity, just as facts about the development of logic in the 19th century should perhaps limit our appeals to charity in interpreting Kant's logic.

That said, even if Kant does make a mistake concerning the is-ought gap, that mistake is hard to pin down. To see this, I consider the two best-known statements of the is-ought gap: Hume's and G. E. Moore's. Despite an obvious similarity, Hume and Moore's approaches and concerns are different. Without attempting a comparison of their views, I argue that my proposed reading of Kant contains the resources to accommodate many of the intuitions Hume and Moore draw on. If so, then my proposal does not obviously put Kant in a philosophically bad position.

6.1. Hume and Kant on "is" and "ought"

Hume's well-known discussion occurs as a paragraph near the beginning of Book 3 of his *Treatise*. It runs as follows:

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with... author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it shou'd be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it ... [I] am perswaded, that this small attention wou'd subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceiv'd by reason. (*Treatise* 3.1.1.27)

It is not obvious how strong a claim Hume is making here.³⁰ Even so, we can see that nearly everything Hume says here is consistent with Kant, as I read him. The initial

³⁰ For one modest reading, see Pigden 2010, whose discussion partly aligns with mine in this section.

characterization Hume gives of his target is an inference from “the being of a God” or “observations concerning human affairs” to an “ought.” Kant could agree that those particular inferences were “of the last consequence,” and mistaken. Kant denies that we can reach moral conclusions from theological premises, since he thinks that moral cognition is epistemically prior to cognition of God (see *GMS* 4:408-09). As we saw in Section 5.2, Kant also accepts that there is a gap between any empirical facts (such as human affairs) and “ought” facts. It is significant that Hume does not include an “et cetera” in the above passage. Taken at face value, Hume seems to be saying that the “change” that requires explanation occurs only in views that derives “ought”s from one of these two particular sources.

In addition, Hume does not state that “ought”s can never be inferred from “is”s. Rather, he states that this change is surprising, “of the last consequence,” “shou’d be observe’d and explain’d,” and that “a reason should be given.” To be sure, he also says that this deduction “seems altogether inconceivable.” Now, if Hume is only considering the theories he describes, then Kant could agree that such inferences seem inconceivable. But even if Hume’s concern is broader, then Kant can still agree that this deduction must be explained. Kant’s explanation, on my reading, would appeal to a non-obvious analytic equivalence. So Kant could agree that any shift from “is”s to “ought”s is surprising and requires explanation, though he could go on to add that, for some shifts, there is such an explanation to be had.

At the end of the paragraph, Hume states that “the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects.” If “object” here is in contrast to “subject,” then Kant could agree that “ought”s are not founded on relations of objects, since what “ought” facts describe is a feature of the subject’s will. But even if we count the subject’s will as an object, Kant could agree that “object”s are not *founded* on any facts about the will, so long as “founded” is taken in an epistemological sense, since our awareness of the moral law (as such) is epistemologically prior to our awareness of our own freedom (as such) (see *KprV* 5:5n., 5:31, and §2 above).

This leave the last clause, where Hume states that “the distinction of vice and virtue is not ... perceiv’d by reason.” There may be a genuine disagreement here, but it takes some work to pin it down, for Hume and Kant have different notions of reason.

Hume defines reason in this section of the *Treatise* as “the discovery of truth or falshood” (*Treatise* 3.1.1.9). If my argument in §3.1 is correct, however, then this is a different sense of “reason” than Kant’s. The capacity for representations with universal quantitative contents may or may not be a capacity for discovering truth and falsity. So while reason, in Kant’s sense, does have an essential role in ‘discovering’ moral distinctions,³¹ that alone does not show that Kant disagrees with Hume’s statement.

Nonetheless, on my reading, Kant does hold that the discovery of at least some moral facts would also be the discovery of certain truths about reason and the will, though the latter might be only confusedly grasped. In Hume’s sense of “reason,” this would perhaps be a matter of moral truths being perceived by reason. Still, this is a very different sort of discovery than one concerning God or human affairs, which fits with Hume’s main emphasis in the passage. In locating the basis for our perceptions of moral distinctions in the subject (and not anything in the world of experience), it has some significant points of similarity to Hume’s view.³² So while Hume and Kant probably do differ here, my reading of Kant allows him to agree with much of Hume’s best-known description of the is-ought gap.

6.2. Moore and Kant on the good

Hume did not have Kant’s view in mind when he wrote the *Treatise*. G. E. Moore, however, did have Kant in mind when he made his Open Question Argument. The Open Question Argument is meant to support an is-ought gap of some sort, one that is stronger than Hume’s in at least one respect (insofar as it is supposed to conflict with naturalism) and perhaps weaker than Hume’s in another (insofar as it is more amenable to cognitivism than Hume’s). As with Hume, my aim here is not to settle any of major

³¹ Strictly speaking, for Kant, as I read him, reason itself (in Kant’s sense) does not *discover* moral distinctions. Rather, moral distinctions are *about* reason, namely, about what the agent would do if reason determined her will. For Kant, the discovery of these latter facts for Kant is probably not achieved by reason alone. It also requires the distinct capacity of reflection (see Marshall 2014).

³² Hence Hume’s claim that the fact of vice “lies in yourself not in the object” (*Treatise* 3.1.1.26).

interpretive questions about Moore's argument, but only to show that my interpretation leaves Kant in a position to agree with many of the intuitions Moore invokes.

Before looking at Moore's main argument, I want to highlight a passage from his discussion of Kant in Chapter 4 of the *Principia*. There, Moore offers several (not obviously consistent) characterizations of Kant's metaethical view, some of which resemble the interpretation I have proposed:

The fallacy of supposing moral to be analogous to natural law... is contained in one of the most famous doctrines of Kant. Kant identifies what ought to be with the law according to which a Free or Pure Will *must* act... And by this identification he... means that what [the Free Will] ought to do *means* nothing but its own law – the law according to which it must act... If that 'This ought to be done' means 'This is willed by a Free Will,' then, if it can be shewn that there is no Free Will which wills anything, it will follow that nothing ought to be done." (*Principia*, §75)

Moore takes Kant to be making a semantic claim about "ought," as I do. The objectionable implication Moore mentions at the end here is presumably one Kant would accept: if it could be demonstrated that there was no free will (or, more strongly, that free will was not possible), then it would indeed follow for Kant that nothing ought to be done.³³ The important point for my purposes, though, is that Moore's reading of Kant is similar to my own. Given that, testing my reading against his Open Question Argument provides a useful test of whether my reading is uncharitable.

The main lines of the Argument are laid out in Chapter 1 of the *Principia* (see especially §11 and §13). Moore's presentation is confusing in several respects, and my purposes only require that Kant's view stand up to the most common understanding of the argument. In sum, the argument is typically understood as follows. If someone could ask, without any sign of conceptual confusion, whether some moral property M is instantiated by something with non-moral property N, then $M \neq N$. Applied to my interpretation, the objection would run as follows: We can ask, with significance, if we

³³ "the *ought*, if one has the course of nature before one's eyes, has no significance [*Bedeutung*] whatsoever" (A547/B575). Kant, of course, does not think such a demonstration is possible (see Bxxixff.).

ought to do what reason alone would determine our wills to do. Therefore, “ought” does not mean “what reason alone would determine our wills to do.”

A common response to Moore in contemporary philosophy is to say that the identity of M and N is a synthetic fact, not an analytic one. That response is not available to Kant, as I read him. Even so, Kant could respond to this objection on two levels. He could (i) allow that there is a certain first-order openness about moral questions, such that knowing Analytic Equivalence does not itself tell us which actions we ought to perform, and (ii) allow for a certain higher-order openness, such that being improperly reflective can keep us from fully understanding moral terms.

On (i): By itself, Analytic Equivalence states only that “ought” facts are facts about what reason would do if it alone determined the will. By itself, this gives us no knowledge about which particular actions we ought to perform. To know what we ought to do, we have to know how reason *would* in fact determine the will, and neither analysis nor empirical facts tell us that. That further knowledge requires applying the universalizability test, which is not a matter of mere analysis. The same holds for knowing which things are morally good and evil, since Kant defines these in terms of objects of the faculty of desire “in accordance with a principle of reason” (*KprV* 5:58). So there is a strong sense in which, on my proposal, the questions of what we ought to do are ‘open’: knowing the analysis of “ought” (or of similar notions like “good”) does not give us first-order guidance on what to do. By way of contrast: if the correct analysis of “good” were “pleasurable,” then we would have much concrete guidance on what to do, since there are straightforward empirical facts about pleasure. But the analysis of “ought” I am attributing to Kant is too open-ended by itself to help with moral decisions, even if complemented by empirical facts.

On (ii): Kant thinks that his ethical views are somehow contained in “the common idea of duty and of moral laws” (*GMS* 4:389, see also *KprV* 5:8n.). Nonetheless, he knows that other philosophers take moral terms to refer to other things, such as education, physical feelings, moral feelings, or the will of God (see *GMS* 4:441-43, *KprV* 5:39ff.). Despite morality being a priori and even contained in ‘common rational moral cognition,’ Kant holds that philosophers can still get morality wrong. Any interpretation must allow for this. If analytic facts were always obvious, then my interpretation might

face a special problem here, but as we have seen, Kant does not think this (perhaps in contrast to Moore: see *Principia* §6). In fact, we need some story along these lines in the theoretical case. Kant thinks it is analytic that the concept of causation involves (genuinely) necessary connection (see, e.g., *Prolegomena* 4:257), yet he knows that Hume attempts to derive the concept from subjective association and habit (B5). Kant must hold that, at some point, it seemed like an open question to Hume whether the causation involved genuine necessity, despite this being analytically true. Since Kant is already committed to having that kind of explanation in the case of causation, he could well hold that a similar explanation holds in the moral case.

What might that explanation look like? Here is one possibility. Kant thinks that empiricists like Locke misunderstand the nature of our higher faculties, such as reason (see A271/B327). Now, if part of the *meaning* of “ought” is “reason,” then if one does not have a clear conception of reason, one’s grasp of the meaning of “ought” will be problematic, such that it might seem like an open question as to how one should use the term. As an analogy: a creature who lacks a clear concept of politeness might think that there is an open question as to how one should use the term “gaffe.” It might seem to him or her that, for any particular social interaction, it is an open question whether that could count as a gaffe. This felt openness comes from being semantically ungrounded. Failing to properly understand the faculty of reason, for Kant, would be a serious impediment to philosophical understanding, not least since reason is the core of our proper self (*GMS* 4:457). Since Kant thinks it is possible for philosophers to misunderstand our faculty of reason, we should expect him to allow for similar openness in the use of any terms whose corresponding concepts analytically involve the notion of reason.

Conclusion

My aim in this paper has been to show that there is significant textual support for thinking that Kant derives an “ought” from an “is,” and that this interpretation is not obviously uncharitable. If my argument is successful, then the next question is how it compares to other defensible interpretations. I have not attempted such a comparison

here, but I hope to have shown that what might otherwise have seemed like an absurd interpretive approach to Kant's metaethics deserves consideration.³⁴

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